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## **My life as a vixen**

**Morwenna Griffiths**

### **Introduction**

Isaiah Berlin's influential essay, 'The Hedgehog and the Fox' suggests that there are two categories of thinkers (Berlin, 1969). Using an ancient Greek poetic fragment ('The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog knows one big thing'), he suggests they can be divided into hedgehogs who view the world through the lens of a single defining idea and foxes, who draw on a wide variety of experiences and for whom the world cannot be boiled down to a single idea. I am a fox – in fact, a vixen (perhaps not something that would have occurred to Berlin whose references are uniformly to males). Looking back on my intellectual history, I see that it is one in which my ideas have changed and emerged as I moved from one social context to another, collaborated with other people, taught in a range of institutions, and relished the challenge of coming to grips with unfamiliar ideas. I have never stopped learning from the very beginning of my career as an educator, when I was an untrained volunteer in a socially disadvantaged primary school, to my current position as a professor of education at Edinburgh University. The longer I continue in education, the more I realise the need to go on developing my practices and my understanding. I still wonder what to do for the best. I keep on making mistakes (new ones!), and I keep on learning from them. I think I understand more than I did. But I am still puzzled and perplexed by the ideas I encounter and am still thinking hard about how to deal with them.

I had wondered how to tell the story of coming to my present understanding of what we educators do and should do. I did not want to write a linear, chronological autobiography in which it would be hard to avoid the familiar, fairy-tale genre of the narrator as hero (or tragic hero). That genre tells the story of the hero's journey towards a worthwhile goal, how obstacles are overcome (or not) through determination, goodness and cleverness, usually with the help of a wise guide. On the other hand I did not want to go to the other extreme of denying my agency altogether, with a story of my being merely a kind of witness of my own life, as I blundered about from one context and social structure to another. Moreover, my ideas have not

developed in a neat linear progression but rather in a series of interweaving spirals from the changing circumstances of my life.

I am particularly conscious of the complexities of autobiographical writing. I have written a lot about personal narrative, and have used personal narrative in a range of my work, philosophical and other. I find it theoretically unsatisfactory just to use a straightforward, linear, biographical approach. In what follows, I have constructed a mix of narrative approaches. There are some – sometimes parallel – chronological descriptions. These are punctuated by examples of particular issues that have engaged my attention. Each one has been connected to one example of the circumstances in which these issues have developed. That is, the examples demonstrate a mixture of agency and structure. The issues that have come to matter to me are behind the agency exercised in continuing to address them. The issues I focus on are (in no particular order) (1) social justice, (2) feminism, (3) relational selves and (4) reflective practice through personal narrative. The circumstances in which they arise are one aspect of the structures which have constrained, facilitated and constructed my approach to and understanding of those issues. The ones I present as particularly significant are (again, in no particular order) (a) migrations, (b) openness to happenstance, (c) dialogue of various kinds, and (d) teaching. Other versions – and other examples – of my autobiography in relation to ideas can be found in Griffiths (1995, 1998b, 1999, 2012a, 2013).

### **First chronological description: A life on the move**

I was born in Tanganyika, now part of Tanzania. I lived there until I was ten. My father was a colonial administrator, so every two years he had a 'long leave' when we would visit South Africa and the UK for some months, after which he would be moved to a new posting, and we would all move house. The UK was a foreign country. My two brothers and I had all been born in Tanzania, my parents were both born in South Africa, and one grandparent was born in India because my great-grandfather was a soldier in the British army. Most of our closer family of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins lived half a continent away in South Africa. However my parents did not want to return to apartheid South Africa so when my father retired aged 50, we went to England where I had some great aunts and uncles. My father found work there, and so did my mother who had been a physics teacher

before she married. They ended up living in Kent for about six years and then my father got a job in Botswana, where my parents spent nearly a decade, before finally retiring to Oxford. By that time I was in my late twenties and had long left home.

I come from a family of migrating teachers, ministers of religion and administrators. My own generation has continued to move. My two brothers live in Australia and we have first cousins in the USA and Botswana as well as in South Africa and the UK. In Tanganyika we all went to boarding schools from seven years old. The children of colonial administrators and of other expatriates had their own schools, separate from the local ones and boarding schools were the only option. Home was a happy place for me so boarding school may sound like a hardship. Seven seems so young to me now! But I loved going to boarding school in the primary years. I liked the school work and I liked having so many other children to play with.

All my own immediate family has been scientifically educated with the exception of my anthropologically trained father. I was hopeless at languages or anything requiring deft handiwork but equally at home with the arts and the sciences. In the last couple of years at school we were required to specialise in one area of the curriculum. I hated dropping any of my favourite subjects. My scientific and book-loving mother explained that I could continue enjoying literature and history more easily than I could keep up physics or mathematics. That made sense to me. I was already, perhaps, developing as a 'vixen'. I took physics and mathematics at A level and went on to get a physics degree at university in Bristol. Before plunging from a school immersion in science into a university one I took a break of a year, something that was fairly unusual at the time. I spent a few months as a volunteer teacher of six year olds in inner city Leicester, followed by a couple of months in Israel on a kibbutz and working in an old people's home in Jerusalem, before having to leave when the 1967 war broke out. I joined a UN work camp in Northern Greece, and stayed there for the rest of that year, working and travelling.

After my first degree I stayed at Bristol University, gaining my PGCE<sup>1</sup>. (I was about to get married to a man living in Bristol.) Initially I had enrolled on the course with a view to becoming a secondary school physics teacher, but the programme began with a week observing in a primary school. From this and from memories of Leicester, it

became clear to me that primary teaching was more to my liking. For one thing, I could be less of a subject specialist. The university did not offer a Primary PGCE programme but they allowed me to continue under the guidance of the only primary specialist on the staff, Philip Gammage, who tutored me individually, with the help of his contacts in schools.

Changes of direction and occupation have continued ever since. I got a job in a local primary school in Bristol, but wanted to teach somewhere less suburban. So I transferred to an inner-city school. At that point my marriage fell apart so I handed in my notice and took the opportunity to go travelling. Further changes followed. I ended up in Isfahan in Iran for two years where I taught English as a Foreign Language, first at an air-force school and then at Isfahan University. On my return, I was fortunate, in those better funded days, to get an SSRC<sup>2</sup> grant to study full time for an M.Ed. specialising in philosophy and language. This was followed up by another SSRC grant which enabled me to continue on to a Ph.D. in Philosophy of Education. My career has continued to be punctuated by moves of institution and focus. (I am lucky that my economist husband was employed as an international consultant, and so able to base his home in places that suited my job.) I was employed at Christ Church College of Higher Education in Canterbury for two years as a lecturer in philosophy of education and primary education, then at Oxford Polytechnic for four years as an education lecturer in schools and in Higher Education. That was followed by six years in Nottingham University as a lecturer in Equal Opportunities and Social Justice, ten years at Nottingham Trent University as a Professor of Educational Research, and now for the past seven years at Edinburgh University as Chair of Classroom Learning.

### **First example: The issue of social justice in the context of migrations**

I use the term ‘migration’ to mean physical, social and intellectual movements. It is an adaptation of what Maria Lugones (1989) calls “‘World’-traveling’. Lugones explains that by ‘world’ she does not mean anything imaginary. Rather it is a material and social association in which it is possible to dwell. However her ‘“world”-traveling’ is between worlds which are all present at the same time, in contrast to my ‘migrations’ which include not only travel between different existing ‘worlds’ but also travel to ‘worlds’ from which steps cannot be re-traced. Migrating has required me to adjust

and then re-adjust my understanding of myself, of norms of conduct and of the world at large: in short to adjust my lived theories of identity, ethics, ontology and epistemology. The 'world' may have since disappeared for everyone: Tanganyika is still there as part of Tanzania, but not the British-governed Tanganyika of my childhood. Equally it may be that a new 'world' can make the old one disappear for ever for some people while it continues to exist for others. In my case, a pre-feminist understanding of gender relations is no longer a 'world' I can ever inhabit again.

Migration has been hugely fruitful in my understanding of social justice. I focus on just one way in which migration has influenced my thinking in this regard: the significance of self-identity for self-esteem and for social justice. This only became apparent to me gradually. My understanding of it began, I think, as I reflected on my developing responses to feminism and feminist theory. It was apparent to me that I did not quite fit with mainstream feminist theory of the time, any more than I fitted with mainstream philosophical theory. I explored some of this perception with a feminist philosopher colleague, Anne Seller, in a theoretical paper about the politics of identity (Griffiths and Seller, 1992). We discussed the ways that belonging to one social group and its associated norms of conduct could clash with belonging to another one – and explored the ways in which we both wanted and did not want to belong to various groups. I talked about having a liking for science at a time when much orthodox feminist theory was deeply suspicious of the largely male 'world' of scientists. We discussed the largely male 'world' of philosophy and its norms of conduct.

At the time self-esteem was emerging as a significant concept in education. I reappraised earlier experiences. My increased understanding of what it was to migrate between 'worlds' meant that I did not take at face value a simplistic connection between individual self-esteem and achievement. The correlation existed, in differential academic achievement by different social groups. But the reasons for it might not be the simple causative one that was put forward. I argued that the discomfort of not being able to meet several incoherent social norms simultaneously was a factor in self-esteem. Therefore teachers could promote higher self-esteem in their pupils through implementing inclusive practices for the class as a whole. Focusing on pupils' individual self-esteem and individual achievement dealt with the

symptoms rather than causes of the problem. I continued exploring self-identity and self-esteem in relation to social justice in education in my book on identity (1995) and again in my collaborative books on social justice in education (Griffiths and Davies, 1995 Griffiths, 2003) as well as in a number of articles.

### **Second chronological description: Getting acquainted with philosophy and philosophy of education**

What starts an interest in philosophy? Indeed why is it that some children find enjoyment in something that other children find uninteresting or worse? Whatever the reason, I seem always to have been interested in logical argument, in abstractions and in the big questions about human lives. That said, as I look back now, and tell an autobiographical story in this article, I am reminded how unreliable memory is, and how, as a life unfolds, different incidents are told and retold with new interpretations and to new audiences. So I can tell of some occasions that seem to have been indicative and significant but I remain uncertain about their accuracy or importance.

Like many very young children I was fascinated by abstractions (*pace* Piaget!): the logic behind numbers as well as the kinds of ideas presented to us by preachers. In my secondary school I liked all the classes which encouraged speculative or ethical thinking (Religious Education, mathematics, history, English). I joined the debating club but gave it up as it became clear to me that formal debates were all about competitive glory, a kind of jousting for prizes, with which I did not want to be associated. I loved the extra-curriculum discussions organised by the head teacher based on a radio programme about ideas. I was disappointed at university to discover that undergraduate physics seemed to be more about having enough understanding to predict events rather than reaching a more holistic understanding of the world. Or, more accurately, I saw that only the very best physicists were able to understand the world more holistically, and I would never be that good. At best I would become one who could work out the mathematics - but without knowing what it meant. I was one of the very few among the PGCE students who took an option in Philosophy of Education, and struggled to understand Paul Hirst's transcendental argument about curriculum. As a young teacher I attended evening classes run by the Philosophy Department of the University. Probably the first book in philosophy that I tried to read and study was Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. Inevitably I struggled, but I loved the

struggle and the discussions that the lecturer encouraged. Later, in the months waiting to begin the M.Ed., I attended evening classes run by Stefan Körner who introduced me to his theories of categorial frameworks and the philosophy of mathematics (Körner, 1970). I also avidly followed a television series of the time ‘Men of Ideas’, which featured 15 interviews with prominent philosophers who included just one woman, Iris Murdoch (Magee, 1978).

I began my formal education in philosophy and philosophy of education on the M.Ed. My tutor, Gordon Reddiford, encouraged his students to read original works like Hume’s *Treatise*, Ryle’s *Concept of Mind*, Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* and Kenny’s *Action, Emotion and Will* – as well as what was then orthodox Philosophy of Education, for instance, Hirst on knowledge, Peters on the education of the emotions, and Scheffler on reason. At the point that I had to choose a topic for doctoral studies in order to apply for funding to the SSRC I happened to be writing an essay on the education of emotions, and was finding it complex, difficult and interesting. So I chose that. Gordon helped me fill in the application form. I was puzzled about what to put under ‘methodology’: he wrote in for me, ‘Thinking’. My doctoral studies kept me thinking, as I read, discussed, puzzled, and listened. I audited undergraduate classes in philosophy and attended education graduate seminars in the education department and philosophy graduate seminars in the philosophy department.

### **Second example: The issue of feminism in the context of being open to happenstance**

As with so many of my intellectual developments in philosophy and practice, my understanding of feminism has benefitted hugely from what feels like mere serendipity but which must also be attributed to an openness to happenstance: to treating happenstance as an encouragement to change direction, rather than as a hurdle to be negotiated within an already decided path. Feminist theory and philosophy have been central to my own development as a philosopher of education. My engagement with both has been influenced by such openness. As I have described, my early engagement with both philosophy and philosophy of education was not related to feminist ideas. That changed just as I was completing my doctoral thesis. My philosophical investigation of emotion had been largely based within



mainstream philosophy. As I was nearing completion, the question of how I might re-think the education of emotion became more and more relevant. I had seen that one possibility would be to focus on issues of delinquency and deviance. That would have been enough. However at the same time some of my close friends from outside the academy were arguing about feminism in relation to their own lives. I was dismissive about the project of feminism. Wanting some evidence for my attitude I started to read further first in psychology, and then in other subjects. I read, among others, Archer and Lloyd (1982) and Sayers (1982) on biology and gender, Spender (1980) on language, and Stanworth (1983) on pedagogy – and found, to my consternation, that the arguments for a feminist approach were not as I had assumed. I had, it seemed, been wrong. Involved as I was at the time with constructing philosophical, educational theory, I was set, irrevocably, on a path towards feminist philosophy. Gender became salient in the final chapters of the thesis and appeared not long after in publications about computers (e.g. Griffiths, 1988). However, even more significantly, I had been introduced to a number of other feminists interested in philosophy or, to put it another way, to philosophers interested in feminism. I was fortunate therefore to be there when feminist ideas were discussed, new books were mentioned, and a range of philosophical approaches explored (see next section).

Just as fortunately, I found myself in a position a year or so later to become a co-editor of a book on feminist philosophy. A reading group for women in philosophy across England had been arranged in what was then a typically feminist way of doing things. It met irregularly for a day or two at the weekend. One of our number would agree to host it. Once it was Judith Hughes with Mary Midgely in Newcastle. Another time it was Margaret Whitford with Caroline Bailey in London. I organised some day events in London, with the help of Anne Seller and Alison Assiter. Somebody would suggest a theme, a reading or a discussion of work in progress. It might be a small informal discussion or part of a larger event. Sometimes we stayed overnight somewhere. On one Saturday the weather had been particularly awful, and transport links had been difficult. Margaret Whitford and I were the only two to turn up. We duly discussed the reading. Then one of us suggested that our small group should put together an edited collection of essays, and so we did (Griffiths and Whitford, 1988). Margaret and I drew on very different traditions of philosophy; I had been introduced to the analytic tradition and was using it to investigate emotion, while she drew more

on the French theory, and was currently studying Luce Irigaray. The happenstance of this encounter presented the opportunity for me to engage with a set of completely new, unfamiliar and destabilizing ideas. I read Genevieve Lloyd's *The Man of Reason* and re-thought my ideas about rationality. Jean Bethke Elshtain's *Public Man, Private Woman* introduced me to gender assumptions underlying mainstream political theory. Anne Seller explored the philosophical implications of arguments surrounding the women's camp protesting about cruise missiles at Greenham Common (Seller, 1985). Irigaray's *This Sex which is Not One* introduced me to new ways of engaging with psychoanalytic theory. I addressed these ideas in discussions with the rest of the group, radically changing the direction of my own thinking as I did so. Some of this appears for instance, in the dialogue I constructed with Richard Smith on dependence, independence and interdependence in educational practices (Griffiths and Smith, 1989). It can also be seen in my (1988) article 'Strong feelings about computers'.

### **Third chronological description: Ideas influenced by relations in philosophical and professional societies**

Very shortly after I finished my Ph.D., I met Joanna Hodge, a feminist and philosopher, who had just finished her own thesis on Heidegger. We thought it would be good to have a meeting for women in philosophy, but there were very few indeed that we could think of. I remember standing in a university library scanning the title pages of philosophy journals, trying to find any women's names among the authors. (This was a time before Google!) Finally we identified a dozen women working in philosophy, and invited them to an informal meeting in Joanna's college, St Catherine's.<sup>3</sup> Some of us formed the core of a group which began a series of semi-formal weekend meetings where we presented work in progress or discussed books, as explained in the previous section, in connection with Margaret Whitford's and my collection, *Feminist Perspectives in Philosophy*. Over some years the group gained members, some of them highly active, like Christine Battersby and Soren Reader, and it morphed into the Society for Women in Philosophy (SWIP). The group also gave me a reference group of philosophers, mostly based in philosophy departments but also in adult education, French, and women's studies. We have continued to meet, discuss books, argue and occasionally publish collaboratively ever since. In this group I was introduced to Irigaray, Heidegger, Arendt, Kierkegaard and other thinkers who supplemented my original grounding in Anglo-Saxon traditions of philosophy. My

reading in feminist theory was given an impetus, especially within the newly forming field of feminist philosophy. The collection, *Discovering Reality*, by Harding and Hintikka (1983) was inspiring for us, for instance, as were Donna Haraway's (1985) article, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs' and Carole Pateman's book, (1988) *The Sexual Contract*. We read and discussed Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* when it first came out, and heard Christine Battersby present early versions of what would become chapters in *The Phenomenal Woman*.

In my first year of teaching in Canterbury I went to my first Philosophy of Education Society of Great Britain (PESGB) annual conference where I found myself making new philosophical connections with other philosophers of education and their ideas. I was excited to find myself sitting over breakfast with the authors of the books and papers I had read. Even more exciting was the chance to discuss the presentations with them and to hear what they were working on. As a result I began to respond to some of them in academic papers as well as in discussion. I strongly disagreed with Robin Barrow's position on skills and wrote a response to his paper. A talk with Richard Smith about autonomy led to our paper on dependence. Wilf Carr was in the process of elaborating his theories of action research in relation to philosophy. Michael Fielding introduced me to the double edge of the concept of empowerment. All these, and other discussions, have influenced the direction and manner of my approach to philosophy of education.

The membership elected me to the Executive committee several times, which gave me the opportunity to engage closely with mainstream philosophy of education, responding to the concerns of others in ways which then influenced how I developed ideas from other sources. Sometimes I am invited to contribute to seminar series which include philosophy of education. The directions of my thinking have been influenced by the formal exchanges in these seminars, but even more by the informal face-to-face discussions which they stimulate. Most recently, with the support of PESGB, I have organised a series of three annual seminars for women in philosophy of education at Edinburgh University. Again, the encounters have been personally very fruitful in the development of my own ideas in relation to those of others.

Throughout my career I have sporadically carried out empirical enquiries of various kinds. When I moved to Oxford I was introduced to a very lively group of staff, led by Sarah Tann, Kate Ashcroft and John Isaac, who were designing and implementing a teacher education programme founded on reflective practice. Through them I began to attend the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and to make links with the Collaborative (then Classroom) Action Research Network (CARN). As with PESGB, through BERA (and through election to its Executive committee) I was invited to collaborative enterprises, and got the opportunity for many fruitful face-to-face discussions. While I was at Nottingham University, Jack Whitehead, who I had met through BERA and CARN, invited me to submit a paper to the first Self-Study in Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) conference. Not knowing what ‘self-study’ was, but liking the look of the conference venue in Herstmonceux Castle in Sussex, I improvised a short paper on the theme of ‘know thyself’. It was a happy decision. Over the following decade, the Castle Conference, as it is known, gave me the chance to interact with a group of people developing lively and creative approaches to understanding ourselves as educators. As a result, I expanded my empirical repertoire to include visual methods and investigations of collaboration. All of these fed back into my theoretical and abstract enquiries, integrating research methodologies and practices with philosophical perspectives and approaches (e.g. Griffiths, 1998a).

### **Third example: The issue of relational selves in the context of dialogues**

By the term, ‘dialogues’ I refer to conversations and discussions preferably face-to-face but sometimes also by phone or informal emails when all parties are on-line simultaneously. A dialogue may be backed up by written communications but these are only secondary. Entering into dialogue with others is risky. There is plenty of room for mutual misunderstanding and suspicion. There is also the likelihood that there are significant differences about what the different participants expect to gain. On the other hand, dialogues can lead to exciting and productive new perspectives on old approaches, both theoretically and in educational practice. Belonging, as I did, to a range of philosophical, empirical and professional education circles, I had the opportunity to have conversations and discussions with colleagues who did not share my perspectives and starting points. I found my assumptions and conclusions challenged and changed by these encounters. This has been energising and stimulating. As a result, perhaps, I have increasingly welcomed the chance to be part

of collaborative enterprises even when I think they do not fit my plans for future directions.

One recent collaborative enterprise that did not seem to fit my plans has been helpful in furthering my understanding of the significance of understanding selves as relational. I had not expected this when I accepted an invitation from David Bridges to participate in two linked philosophy of education seminars funded by the Teaching and Learning Research Programme<sup>4</sup> (TLRP) on epistemological perspectives on different educational research methods for policy; and then a year later, to be part of a Keynote Symposium at BERA on the relevance of philosophy of education for teaching, research and policy, in which I was asked to focus on policy. The common themes here were policy and the impact of educational research, including philosophical research on policy. Up until then I had paid little attention to policy as an academic focus of interest. I was far more interested in classroom and school-level education. However I found focus on policy and impact fruitful in extending ideas I had been working on since writing *Feminisms and the Self* in 1995.

A number of dialogues were set in train. I worked closely with Gale Macleod, a colleague at Edinburgh to produce a contribution to the TLRP seminar. We talked for hours in the local coffee bars exploring our different perspectives on research, policy and narrative research. The seminars encouraged the ebb and flow of discussion which led to what Leslie Saunders describes as (2008, p.3):

The power of the encounter: the dialogic way in which knowledge and understanding are created and developed, and become common property through principled debate.

After the keynote symposium, Gale and I continued our discussions about how philosophy might have an impact on policy. We began to look for opportunities to have conversations with philosophers who reported that they had made an impact and with policy makers who might have felt such an impact. As a result of all these conversations I wrote an article which argued for the significance of understanding the self as relational in determining how impact might be achieved (Griffiths, 2012b). The selves of philosophers and policy makers have been constructed in relation to their social and political positioning and this affects how they can and will relate to the other. I followed this article with another one which examined the issue from the

other side, investigating the significance of the policy context for selves of philosophers working within the policy contexts in which impact is so important (Griffiths, 2012c). I argue that the positionality of philosophers of education (their relation to) the policy context constrains who they can then become.

**Fourth chronological description: Ideas influenced by a working, teaching life**

Every time I have moved jobs, I have had to adjust to a new context of teaching – which is both practically and intellectually difficult. However, these difficulties have been a pleasure for my vixen-like self. My career has taken me from a suburban primary classroom to an inner-city problem school (contexts in which I first began to understand some of the complexities of pedagogical relations). My next moves into teaching English as a foreign language took me into a range of contexts: Iranian air-force cadets, Iranian serving teachers, summer schools for various ages, students in college in England needing to improve their English, and individual tuition (contexts in which I developed an increased appreciation of the many ways of negotiating tensions arising from cultural and social difference). Then I began three decades in British Higher Education, as a lecturer in teacher education and in non-vocational education degrees, in both low and high status establishments, and as part of all that, occasionally teaching in various primary schools (contexts in which I was able to explore some of the intricacies to be found in reflective practices – whether termed ‘self-study’, ‘action research’, or ‘reflective teaching’).

Another pleasure for my vixen-like self has been the requirement to teach subjects about which I had not thought myself very knowledgeable, let alone expert. I have found myself learning (very quickly sometimes!) about a range of new areas. Even at the beginning of my career in primary schools, I was expected to teach crafts and games, in both of which I am no more than barely competent. Even when I have been given the – sadly rare – opportunity to teach courses in philosophy of education, it has more often than not been in areas which I had not previously investigated. Moreover, I regularly find that my students’ interests provoke me into investigating new areas. It was undergraduate students who encouraged me two decades ago to think more deeply about self-esteem. Knowing many things, as vixens do, means that connections can be made between them. Throughout my career, I have found that philosophy of

education and educational theory and practice are in a productive tension, so that each changes iteratively as a result of its relation to the other.

#### **Fourth example: The issue of reflective practice through personal narrative, in the context of teaching students**

Reflective practice is a phrase which is much bandied about in teacher education and within policy statements about the continuing professional development of teachers. It is made up of two words which any English speaker would understand, so perhaps it is not surprising that many people think it needs no explanation. However it is a technical term and there has been a great deal of intellectual effort expended in defining what it is and what it ought to be. I first encountered the idea in 1986 at Oxford Polytechnic, as I mentioned earlier, in a team keen to implement reflection. Our work drew on Dewey, Zeichner, Schön and Kemmis; we encouraged students to relate their personal experience to wider theories within the educational literature. We became interested in what it meant to articulate personal experience through narratives, metaphors and visual images. I began to encourage students to use autobiography in their assignments.

The iterative process of moving from teaching to theorising and back to teaching was significant in how I constructed my book on identity, *Feminisms and the Self* in which I drew on the autobiographies of people from a range of 'worlds' to interrogate orthodox theories of the self. The process of researching and writing the book fuelled my interest in personal narratives and how they could be used to re-think orthodox theories within social and political philosophy and theory. Drawing on Lyotard's (1984) concept of 'little stories' in relation to 'grand narratives', I tentatively named this process 'practical philosophy' as it put the 'little stories' of a particular life with the abstractions associated with philosophy into tension with each other. More recently I theorised personal narrative in terms of an epistemology of the unique and particular (Griffiths and Macleod, 2008). This re-theorisation continues to inform my teaching. I encourage students to use 'little stories' and personal experience in their philosophical arguments. Teaching continues to inform my theorising as I have had to sharpen my own understanding in order to be very clear about the difference between personal experience used as a 'little story' and personal experience used as anecdote, journalism, advertising or rhetorical flourish.

## Concluding thoughts

A vixen never reaches a stopping point. There are always so many interesting things to explore and to learn. I am still thinking, still puzzled – and still making mistakes. Dialogues continue serendipitously as ever and, it seems, I am still open to happenstance. My interest in social justice and feminism remains strong, especially in relation to education and philosophy. I continue to investigate them through personal narrative, always alert to how my relational self, the ‘I’, is made up of many kinds of ‘we’. Meanwhile I look forward to seeing what will come of my next migration into the new world of semi-retirement, and to the opportunities it affords for other forms of happenstance, to new dialogues while retaining the chance to teach new cohorts of education students.

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Charles Taylor's collected works but if I have to choose one, I'll cheat a bit by choosing

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Postgraduate Certificate in Education – a year long course that provides the qualification needed to become a teacher in England.

<sup>2</sup> Social Science Research Council, now the Economic and Social Research Council

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<sup>3</sup> They were, to the best of my memory: Brenda Almond (then Brenda Cohen), Alison Assiter, Paula Boddington, Jean Grimshaw, Joanna Hodge, Judith Hughes, Kathleen Lennon, Mary Midgely, Onora O'Neill, Anne Seller, and Margaret Whitford.

<sup>4</sup> The TLRP was a large scale programme of linked research projects funded by the British Government from 2000- 2012. <http://www.tlrp.org/index.html>